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June 8, 2009

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch
Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 12 St., SW
Washington, DC 20554

Re: In the Matter of A National Broadband Plan for Our Future, GN Docket No. 09-51, April 8, 2009

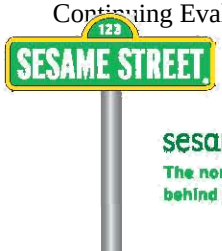
Dear Ms. Dortch:

As the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) seeks comment on how to inform the development of a national broadband plan, Sesame Workshop urges the Commission to consider and prioritize the educational needs of the nation's youngest media consumers—our children.

Sesame Workshop harnessed the power of media to educate children four decades ago with the legendary *Sesame Street* and it continues to innovate to prepare all children to be ready for and succeed in school. Sesame Workshop, with its iconic characters including Big Bird, Cookie Monster and Elmo, has a demonstrated track record of developing innovative and engaging educational content for millions of children and delivering it in a variety of ways —television, radio, books, magazines, and a range of interactive media, including cell phones, iPods and broadband.

Sesame Street is considered the most carefully conceived and thoroughly researched educational television program and hundreds of research studies show that it enhances children's education. The first evaluations of *Sesame Street* indicated that children who were exposed to the program scored higher on letter, number and classification tests than non-viewers. The more children viewed, the greater their knowledge.[1] Longitudinal research also established that frequent *Sesame Street* viewing in preschool is associated with higher high school grade point averages.[2]

[1] Ball, S. & Bogatz, G.A. (1970). The First Year of Sesame Street: An Evaluation. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service; Bogatz, G.A. & Ball, S. (1971). The Second Year of Sesame Street: A Continuing Evaluation. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.



As Sesame Workshop explores the latest popular multimedia platforms, research continues to show that the Sesame model works. One recent study found that preschoolers' literacy skills increased when *Sesame Street* content was streamed on parents' cell phones. Currently, the Workshop also is innovating with broadband, integrating 40 years of expertise in children's educational content with the unique opportunities that a robust online environment can provide for young learners through our website offerings (www.sesamestreet.org; http://www.theelectriccompany.tv/).

Children and Broadband: What We Know

Investing wisely in children's education requires careful consideration of how children spend their time and learn. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, on average, children and youth spend a little more than an hour each day on the computer for recreational purposes (1:02).[3] They spend about 19 minutes a day playing games, followed by instant messaging (17 minutes) and visiting Web sites (14 minutes).[4] Interestingly, the time children spend on the computer has more than doubled over a five year period, which the Kaiser Family Foundation attributes to increased access to computers as well as the emergence of highly popular computer activities.[5]

According to the Children's Partnership, early research also shows that broadband can be an effective instructional tool, noting that it can have a strong influence on improving academic performance, especially among children who have lower grades.[6] Further, in the Boston Public Schools, high speed technology networks were integrated into schools and libraries. A subsequent program evaluation found that 80% of the graduates went to college compared to the district average of 65%.[7]

Using Broadband to Help Children Read

Sesame Workshop has recognized the potential opportunities which broadband can provide our nation's young learners and has optimized its unique capacities to address an alarming national literacy crisis. Millions of children between the ages of six and nine are struggling to read at grade level. According to the United States Department of Education, most low-income children in this country are below grade level in reading by

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[2] Huston, A.C., Anderson, D.R., Wright, J.C., Linebarger, D.L., & Schmitt, K.L. (2001). Sesame Viewers as Adolescents: The Recontact Study. In S. Fisch & R. Truglio (Eds.), "G" Is for "Growing": Thirty Years of Sesame Street Research (pp. 131-143). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
[3] Kaiser Family Foundation, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds* (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005), p. 30.
[4] Ibid, p. 30.
[5] Ibid, p.30.
[6] The Children's Partnership, *Helping Our Children Succeed: What's Broadband Got to Do with It?* (Santa Monica, CA: The Children's Partnership, March 2007), p. 2.
[7] Ibid, p. 3.

fourth grade.[8] Further, of public school fourth graders, half of African American students (54%) and Hispanic students (50%) read below basic grade level.[9]

Letting children fall behind in reading has serious long-term consequences.[10] Research shows that children who are behind in reading in the early grades tend to stay behind as they move into the upper grades, with a strong risk of never catching up.[11]

To help young readers develop better literacy skills, Sesame Workshop recently launched the new *Electric Company*, a television show targeted to six- to nine year-olds which offers a robust broadband component. With the help of literacy experts around the country, Sesame Workshop has developed a comprehensive curriculum with four main literacy goals (including decoding of phonics, vocabulary, comprehension of connected text, and motivation) to help struggling readers get back on track. These goals are not only infused throughout the television episodes but throughout the broadband component of the program as well.

Funded by the United States Department of Education, *The Electric Company* uses the power of broadband to reach children where they are and delivers an interactive experience that provides opportunities for big educational gains. When children visit the web site, they have an entertaining and dynamic experience with the potential for a massive dosage of key literacy concepts. Ten unique curricular games (with 81 iterations) allow children to play and earn points (*Electric Company* "shocks") while reinforcing the educational lessons learned in each show. New versions of the games are added each week to reflect each episode's curriculum. Overall, 16 full episodes and a total of 170 video clips, which reinforce curricular lessons, are available for viewing online.

Since *The Electric Company* launched in January of 2009, the broadband component has been extremely popular and well-received by school-age children. Within the first four months of the launch, 486,721 unique visitors came to the site. There is great demand for *The Electric Company* content; most children (79%) have been return visitors. Almost two thirds (62%) have visited five or more times from January to April 2009 and half (50%) have returned at least nine times. Amazingly, visitors have downloaded and played a total of 7,418,853 videos in four months.

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[8] FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, *FPG Snapshot: Improving Early Reading Skills for Children in Poverty* (Chapel Hill, NC; FPG Child Development Institute, June 2007), p. 1.

[9] U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2007 Reading Assessments, available at http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/nativetrends/tables/table_4_2b.asp.

[10] The Joan Ganz Cooney Center, *Getting Over the Slump: Innovation Strategies to Promote Children's Learning*, (New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, 2008), p. 9.

[11] Clay, 1991 and Strickland, 1990 as cited in *Getting Over the Slump: Innovation Strategies to Promote Children's Learning*, (New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, 2008), p. 9.

Recommendations for the Development of a National Broadband Plan

There is no question that broadband has tremendous potential to enhance children's education. Yet broadband services are not readily available to our nation's children, especially in the low-income communities where educational enhancements are needed most. Sesame Workshop urges the Federal Communications Commission to consider two main recommendations in the development of a national broadband plan to help meet the educational needs of children:

1. Ensure broadband is available to minority and low-income children;

As the FCC considers the development of a national broadband plan, one of the Commission's top priorities must be ensuring the availability of services for minority and low-income families. While overall the percentage of Americans with broadband access continues to improve, growth in broadband has been flat for African-Americans and low-income Americans.[12]

Internet access among children ages 7 to 17 differs greatly by ethnicity.[13] Less than half of Native American (41%), African-American (43%) and Latino youth (44%) have home Internet access compared to 75 percent of Asian-American and 80 percent of white youth.[14]

Lack of access to broadband is particularly pronounced in low-income families. More than one third of low-income children do not have access to a computer at home and more than two thirds have no broadband connection at home.[15] Further, low-income families with children are twice as likely as other families to be without a broadband connection (62% versus 32%).[16]

Given the often limited educational resources that are available to minority and low-income families, technology can play a great equalizing role in children's education. While a range of programs, from the federal E-Rate to local after-school experiments, have focused on expanding access, the majority of minority and low-income children still have limited opportunities for broadband use at school and home.[17] We must level the playing field. It is essential that the FCC ensure that broadband access is affordable and readily available to minority and low-income children so that they have access to innovative and engaging educational content.

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[12] Pew Internet and American Life Project, *Home Broadband, 2008* (Washington, D.C., Pew Research Center, 2008), p. ii.
[13] The Benton Foundation, *An Action Plan for America: Using Technology and Innovation to Address Our Nation's Critical Challenges* (Evanston, Illinois: The Benton Foundation, 2008), p. 32.
[14] Ibid, p. 32.
[15] Connected Nation, *Consumer Insights to America's Broadband Challenge: A Research Series from Connected Nation, Inc*. (Washington, D.C., Connected Nation, October 13, 2008), p. 6.
[16] Ibid, p. 6.
[17] The Joan Ganz Cooney Center, *Getting Over the Slump: Innovation Strategies to Promote Children's Learning*, (New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, 2008), p. 29.

2. Recognize the role quality content can play in driving broadband demand.

The FCC should consider why many Americans choose *not* to subscribe to broadband services. Almost half of all adults in the United States (45%) do not have broadband service at home.[18] The number of families without broadband is also considerable; 38% of parents with children at home do not have a home broadband connection.[19]

When non-adopters are asked why they don't have broadband, one fourth (23%) say that it is too expensive.[20] Yet cost is not the main reason that Americans don't subscribe. Interestingly, the largest barrier is a general lack of awareness or understanding about the benefits broadband can provide. Many Americans simply do not believe that broadband is relevant to their lives.[21] Almost half of those with no home broadband connection (44%) say that they do not need the service; nearly one-third (30%) of parents who do not have a home broadband connection share that sentiment.[22]

Given these statistics, the FCC should ensure that public education and parental awareness about the educational benefits of broadband is part of the development of a national broadband plan. Further, the FCC should recognize the role that engaging, creative content can play in driving broadband demand. The success of *The Electric Company* website is a strong case in point. Hundreds of thousands of children are exposed to highly educational content that is entertaining, engaging *and* enhancing their literacy skills and they are returning for increased doses.

Through the Broadband Technology Grants Opportunity Program, the FCC and National Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) should support public awareness about the educational benefits of broadband, as well as the creation of innovative educational content. Supporting the development of more high quality, educational content online will not only help children learn but can drive demand for broadband services by reminding parents of the educational benefits of this technology.

Conclusion

The FCC has long recognized that children are a unique audience that merit special consideration. As the Commission now considers how to best develop a broadband plan to serve the nation, the educational needs of children must be a top priority. Sesame Workshop urges the FCC to ensure that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, income or geography, have broadband access so they can benefit from the robust, engaging educational content available online. We also urge the FCC to support and promote quality children's content online, ultimately recognizing the role it can play in driving demand for broadband services.

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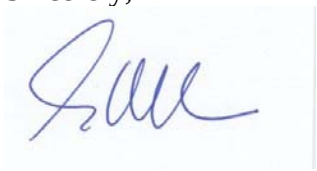
[18] [18] Pew Internet and American Life Project, *Home Broadband, 2008* (Washington, D.C., Pew Research Center, 2008), p. 1.
[19] Connected Nation, *Consumer Insights to America's Broadband Challenge: A Research Series from Connected Nation, Inc.* (Washington, D.C., Connected Nation, October 13, 2008), p. 6.
[20] Ibid, p. 7.
[21] Ibid, p. 2.
[22] Ibid, p. 2.

The FCC's Notice of Inquiry states that "It is technology that intersects with just about every great challenge facing our nation." Sesame Workshop's 40-year history demonstrates that not only does technology intersect with great challenges, it can actually intervene to help address these challenges. Clearly, one of the most pressing issues we face today is how to provide a quality education to all of the nation's children. Broadband has a role to play in addressing this challenge. Now is the time to harness its power to engage and excite children, helping them to learn, thrive and reach their full potential.

Sincerely,



Gary E. Knell
President and CEO